

LUKE 2:1-20

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

SERMON

This morning I signed on to facebook, to see what was happening in the world of my friends and colleagues, as you do, and I came across a post from a friend of mine, Zac. He’s a pastor in Georgia and also a self-professed nerd when it comes to Near Eastern History and Archaeology. He had written a rather thoughtful and concise post filling in some historical details about the nativity that are helpful in illuminating the real context of the story for us. On Christmas Eve, I love to read the Nativity story, but I also love to dive in to

some of the historical details we might otherwise miss. I think it makes the story more compelling, to hear what it really must have been like.

The first thing he pointed out is this: “Jesus was born in Judea but his parents lived in Galilee. It was a different country that spoke a different dialect of Aramaic, with a distinct culture, climate, economy, religious practice and relationship to Roman authority. It was a foreign land. [Mary and Joseph] were forced [to be in Bethlehem in Judea, away from their home,] by political and economic forces beyond their control. Jesus was born in a land that was being ruled by an oppressive foreign regime [the Romans] who were exploiting his people for economic and political reasons. It was governed by leaders who were power hungry and easily threatened, and who gave little thought to ordering the murder of their own people.” This framing of the story stuck with me in a new and different way this year. God comes to earth, born as a baby who is displaced from his actual home. He’s born “on the road” in a sense. When we remember that just a bit later Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt to escape the murderous King Herod with the infant Christ, it seems to me that this whole story resonates with empathy and compassion for the refugee. That speaks to me, that our God would choose to be born and experience life as a refugee. It says that when I open a newspaper and see photos of boats overfull of families washing up on the shores of Greece, aid workers standing at the ready to hand out blankets, clean clothes, and warm soup...it tells me that in that picture, our God identifies with the people on the boat, because that’s where Jesus was born, to a family on the move, away from home. Those escaping the violence and terror of their homeland. It’s a nuanced way to see this story of our savior, born as a baby.

Now, another detail of the story that bears examination is that old barn or stable. In the ancient near east, people lived in kind of two-story houses. The first floor was the barn or stable floor. The animals lived there, eating, pooping, sleeping, and doing all the things animals did. The family lived on the second floor, safely above the refuse of the animals and the flooding spring mud and water. So when we say barn, we really mean first floor of the house. And what else is interesting about these homes is that when strangers wandered into a new town, there weren’t any Hampton Inns or Motel 6s waiting for them. Hotels, as we know them, didn’t exist at all. Rather, people would rely on the hospitality and kindness of the residents of the town to house them. You’d go, knock on a stranger’s door, and hope that they’d let you stay the night with them. Because of the census, Bethlehem was overfull with guests. When we say “there was no room at the inn” that really means, “no family had space for them on the family floor of their house.”

But someone did have room for them on the first floor, that stable floor, the basement of a house filled with animals. It’s an image that cuts two ways. On one hand, we sort of feel cranky and self righteous about it. Like, how could Jesus be born in the mud among the animals!? Really, no one could make space for this woman in labor and her fiancé? How selfish of them. But on the other hand, it’s an image of kindness. Perhaps the house really, truly was overfull. Maybe the other guests were asleep and unwilling to move. Who

knows? What we do know is that maybe this person did their best. They opened up the space they had, a muddy first floor with the animals, because it was better than nothing. Again, this week, I was reminded of how much this situation parallels so many experiences of refugees from Syria. A friend of mine lived in Germany for some time, and her host family now has a Syrian family living in their basement. That's not an uncommon story. The Pope himself has actually called for any Catholic church who does not host refugees on their property to lose their tax-exempt status. The nativity story is never about the comfort or glamor of the location. It's about giving from what we have to offer safe harbor to others.

Now, finally, it's worth taking a moment to think about the family dynamics of the nativity story, which really aren't that distant from what we might experience today. "Jesus was born as an illegitimate child - out of wedlock. This fact would have put Mary and Joseph under intense scrutiny and likely opened the entire family to social stigma. It's interesting that we never hear a word about Joseph and Mary's parents - probably because they could have been disinherited and disowned by their families for such an offense to the integrity of their respective families." It's common enough for us to remember that Mary was an unwed teenage mom, but then we often gloss over that with bright pictures of the beautiful, saintly virgin Mary, the chosen one of God. It's acceptable for us that she was an unwed teenage mother, because she was the mother of Jesus! But, just for a second, forget the fact of Jesus. Just think about Mary. Think about how you would respond, if your daughter, your granddaughter, your niece or cousin came and told you that they were going to end up an unwed, teenage mom. It's not a situation families or society is known for taking with grace and compassion, right? There was real cost to Mary and to Joseph to follow the calling God had placed upon them.

There's a moral ambivalence to their story. It's conflicting that God would come to earth, disrupting the engagement of a previously upright and respectable couple. It tears apart the social fabric so many of us prize above everything else. And it makes me wonder, if part of this nativity story shows us that being people of faith, people who follow the call God puts on our hearts, if sometimes that call is going to be costly. So much of what Jesus comes into this world to preach, it runs counter to the values our society holds in high honor. To give up everything we own, literally disavow all possessions, in order to follow him. To disown our own desire for power, for greatness, and instead seek to become the servant of others, the lowliest, the meekest. To seek out those who are forgotten, those who are out of sight, out of mind, the homeless, the refugee, the addict and spend our time with them, rather than pursue relationships with those in power. Jesus preached a radical message, for sure, but even before that, he was born in a radical way, completely unexpected, and somewhat disturbing.

And for me, that's a more realistic picture of the nativity. Far more colorful than the tame, sterile crèche scenes I decorate my own home with. A family far from home, possibly

disowned by their own, a baby born in the mud, a message that says, so clearly, God comes in the most unexpected ways. God is most present with those experiencing strife. And as we come to know through the life and ministry of that baby, Jesus, this is a God who asks nothing less of us, to be unexpected, extravagantly hopeful, welcoming, kind, and generous to every single person we come across. In short, we take seriously the phrase, "A Merry Christmas to All. And to All a good night." It means we take that "all" very seriously. That as the unexpected and hopeful people of God, we offer the gift of Emmanuel, that little baby born in a manger, God with us, to every person we come in contact with. Merry Christmas, and Amen.